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EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF THE PLAN OF ACTION TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION

Report of the Executive Director

Summary

The Executive Director is pleased to transmit to the Council the findings of the external evaluation of the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification (PACD) (attached) arranged by him in response to Governing Council decision 15/23 which, inter alia, requested the Executive Director "to arrange for an external evaluation of the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification to be conducted and for the results to be presented well in time for the proposed United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, but not later than the Governing Council at its 16th session" (in 1991).

The Executive Director concurs with the findings and recommendations contained in the report.

Suggested action by the Governing Council

The Governing Council may wish to: note the findings and recommendations of the evaluation and request the Executive Director to forward the findings of the evaluation report to the Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development 1992 as part of the Council's report on the status of desertification and implementation of the United Nations Plan of Action to Combat Desertification. In addition, the Council may wish to further request the Executive Director to revise the existing recommendations of PACD in light of the evaluation findings and the progress achieved in its implementation and to include the revised recommendations into the Council's report on the status of desertification and implementation of the United Nations Plan of Action to Combat Desertification.

THE EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF THE PLAN OF ACTION
TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. In view of the great concern that desertification remains unabated, and that international efforts to halt its spread, as envisaged by the United Nations Plan of Action to Combat Desertification (PACD) endorsed by the General Assembly in 1977, remain inadequate, the Governing Council at its 15th session requested the Executive Director (decision 15/23, Part A, para. 8) to arrange for an external evaluation of the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification to be conducted and for the results to be presented well in time for the proposed United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, but not later than the Governing Council at its 16th session" (in 1991).

2. This evaluation report was prepared using the following methodology:

(a) Six desertification experts, whose nationality and experience covered all the regions of the world affected by desertification, working independently of one another, prepared a total of six reports;

(b) The reports were synthesized by the UNEP Follow-up and Evaluation Section into a single draft report;

(c) The draft report was then discussed and amended by 10 high-level experts in desertification at a meeting held in Geneva from 6-9 July 1990. Five of the ten experts who attended this meeting were among those who had prepared the original reports.

3. The text that follows is the independent evaluation of the validity of PACD.

II. VALIDITY OF THE PLAN'S PREMISES

4. There was general consensus among the consultants that:

(i) PACD is an appropriate instrument to assist Governments in developing national programmes for arresting the process of desertification;

(ii) PACD is based on sound scientific grounds;

(iii) The objectives of PACD remain sound;

(iv) The basic principles guiding PACD, as contained in paragraph 16 of PACD, are valid;

(v) The following three priorities for action were and still remain valid: (a) arresting the desertification processes; (b) establishment of ecologically sound and productive land use; and (c) social and economic advancement of the communities affected by desertification.

5. However, some of the Plan's premises need to be reviewed in light of the following:

(i) The goal of implementing the PACD by the year 2000 has proved unrealistic. In 1984, the General Assessment of Progress in the Implementation of PACD suggested that it be extended for an additional period of 10 years. However, it would be more realistic to note that anti-desertification action is a continuing process of sustainable development and that it is difficult to set an exact target for its complete implementation;

(ii) The assumption that both donors and host countries were ready to "divert" human and fiscal resources from immediate development activities to long term rehabilitation of desertified lands was, in retrospect, overly optimistic;

(iii) Equally over-optimistic was the expectation that Governments would change their internal policies that set action priorities in a relatively short period of time;

(iv) PACD was presented as an answer to desertification problems. Many governments did not perceive it as part of a broader plan for sustainable development although this was the context within which PACD was presented;

(v) PACD gives great weight to the causes and symptoms of an ecological and agricultural nature, while the underlying forces exacerbating desertification are, in fact, rooted in social and economic conditions;

(vi) PACD calls for giving priority to the protective maintenance of productive lands prone to desertification rather than to distant prospects of complete reconstitution of areas that are already degraded. While this is valid from the agricultural and economic points of view, it may not be justified if we are dealing with populations living on marginal lands where most desertification occurs, particularly in developing countries. Whether these populations live on productive lands prone to desertification or on lands that need complete reconstitution, their situation should be given priority in any anti-desertification programmes. Otherwise neglecting them will force them to overuse other lands that are productive but prone to desertification, i.e. emphasis should be placed on marginal land stabilization, but non-desertified areas that are desertification prone should not be neglected. In any event, priorities should remain site-specific, taking into consideration the state of the population;

(vii) Although the PACD specifically pointed out that "desertification" was not an advance of the desert frontier engulfing productive land on its perimeter, the term "desertification" gave many politicians this incorrect perception. The term "land degradation" would have led to better understanding. From our current perspective, a more accurate terminology is necessary;

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(viii) The definition of desertification needs to be sharpened. Earlier definitions represented desertification as an environmental problem that could be combated if the money and technology were available. It is now understood widely that the desertification process, like many other environmental problems, is a complex problem linked with development and the use of land and water resources. It calls for an updated definition. An accepted definition is that desertification is land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas resulting from adverse (effect of) human impacts.

III. VALIDITY AND FEASIBILITY OF THE PLAN'S RECOMMENDATIONS

6. The recommendations contained in PACD were the result of discussions among delegates representing 94 countries. In order to achieve consensus the recommendations had to: (i) cover the specific concerns of all delegations attending the United Nations Conference on Desertification (UNCOD), and (ii) be broad enough for global application. The result was that PACD was approved by UNCOD with 28 recommendations, which, in retrospect, were:

(i) Overambitious, given the available resources. If adequate financing had been made available and if Governments had incorporated desertification control measures into their national development plans, it is possible that the recommendations could have been implemented;

(ii) Too numerous, so as to overwhelm countries that lacked capabilities and resources;

(iii) Although general in their nature, so comprehensive in their coverage of all aspects of the desertification problem that they seemed a blueprint for environmentally sound development.

7. Although the recommendations of PACD can still be considered valid, their lack of focus may have resulted in a less than desired concentration on the major issues.

8. Some recommendations contained in the PACD are formulated on the basis of scientific and technical approaches, omitting the economic and social implications that are better understood by politicians and decision makers. Hence, those recommendations in PACD that deal with socio-economic aspects could be strengthened, emphasizing the need for comprehensive economic planning for national development, implementation by local communities and environmentally sound management of resources. There is also a need to make it clear and to realize that the costs of allowing desertification to continue will be greater than the costs of preventing it.

9. The General Assessment of progress in the implementation of the PACD, 1978-1984, contained a number of recommendations that are still valid.

IV. APPROPRIATENESS OF THE MECHANISMS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PLAN

National mechanisms

10. Because of the reasons given in section VI of this report, national mechanisms to implement PACD were not effective. However, the nationa' mechanisms foreseen in PACD for its implementation remain valid and will work if Governments give priority to the implementation of the Plan and if adequate funding is provided.

Regional mechanisms

11. Regional mechanisms for implementation of PACD may involve too many actors to be practical; but regional mechanisms for co-ordinating certain activities, such as research, training, exchange of information, such as regional networks, would be effective.

12. The main constraints to developing regional plans of action and to establishing research centres have been lack of resources and strained political relations rather than inadequacy of regional machinery.

International mechanisms

13. The international mechanisms set out in PACD for its implementation are adequate:

(i) The Governing Council of UNEP has been successful in specifying particular activities for priority actions and in following up the progress made in implementing PACD world-wide;

(ii) The United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office (UNSO), through the UNEP/UNDP Joint Venture as a special institutional arrangement, has effectively initiated and supported many activities for the implementation of PACD in the Sudano-Sahelian region of Africa;

(iii) The Inter-Agency Working Group on Desertification (IAWGD), has been useful, although it could have been a more effective mechanism if, its decisions and recommendations had been followed up and incorporated into the programmes of the United Nations specialized United Nations agencies;

(iv) The Desertification Control Programme Activity Centre (DC/PAC), on behalf of the Executive Director of UNEP, did not guide the implementation of the PACD effectively because of insufficient organizational structure and personnel. DC/PAC should be moulded into a group capable of, inter alia, monitoring the implementation of PACD globally, pinpointing the gaps in implementation and suggesting remedial action.

V. APPROPRIATENESS OF THE MECHANISMS FOR FINANCING THE PLAN

14. Although the mechanisms for financing PACD as foreseen in recommendation 28 seemed appropriate, they have only generated a fraction of the funding needed to carry out the plan. As the reasons given in section VI of this report review, financial mechanisms will succeed only if there is political will behind them. In addition, the various mechanisms for funding the Plan of Action were each dependent on new resources or substantial diversion of existing resources. In no case, did this happen on the necessary scale.

15. DESCON has not been an effective mechanism. The General Assessment of Progress in the Implementation of the PACD (1978-1984) (see UNEP/GC.12/9, para. 84 and 85) gave the reasons for the modest performance of DESCON. These reasons are still valid.

16. The UNSO resource mobilization mechanism, supported through the Joint Venture with UNEP/UNDP, has proved to be a viable and increasingly effective arrangement for seeking and channelling additional resources into desertification-control activities in 22 countries of Africa. This success is due in part to an approach based on seeking specifically earmarked resources from donors for operational field projects that are formulated and implemented in close collaboration with the Governments and donors concerned.

17. Programmes as implemented may be understandably short-term, but should be conceived within the framework of a long-term perspective.

18. New mechanisms for financing are suggested in section VII of this report.

VI. CAUSES OF THE SHORTCOMINGS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PACD

19. The main causes for the failure to implement PACD were:

(a) Lack of priority given to PACD

(i) Because of scarce financial resources, Governments in developing countries suffering from desertification gave preference to short-term investments with high returns rather than the long-term low-yield investments necessary to combat desertification. Preference was given to increased production of cash crops in large-scale agricultural schemes, often disregarding control measures that would help prevent desertification, i.e. giving priority to short-term economic growth rather than long-term sustainability;

(ii) Many Governments in countries suffering from desertification did not recognize the enormity of the threat posed by desertification, did not appreciate the costs of desertification and did not appreciate the complex processes of desertification;

(iii) Many Governments in countries suffering from desertification found it difficult to undertake holistic planning by breaking through traditional bureaucratic boundaries that cause sectoral planning by the various ministries;

(iv) Many Governments in countries suffering from desertification did not and still do not have a clear-cut multisectoral governmental organ to co-ordinate the implementation of PACD. In the few countries that have a national PACD, the body responsible for its implementation is in some cases a sectoral ministry without the appropriate authority for co-ordination. In general, countries did not place PACD high enough on their agenda, to consider seriously organizational changes to accommodate it;

(v) Some Governments in countries affected by desertification gave priority to development in areas other than marginal areas, which are the ones most affected by desertification;

(vi) Political instability and hostilities in many countries suffering from desertification were a difficult setting within which to mount an effective programme on environmental problems of natural resources. Moreover, desertification problems were aggravated by the hostilities and consequent flux of refugees.

(b) Lack of financial resources

(i) Many donors did not allocate sufficient resources to implement the large regional and global programmes to combat desertification recommended by PACD;

(ii) Donors preferred to invest in projects that would yield quick visible results that would easily be translated into cost-benefit figures. Unfortunately, most desertification control activities yield results only after a long time period and the cost-benefit figures cannot be easily calculated;

(iii) The bilateral donors, much like the recipient countries involved, demonstrated an inability to adjust their aid programmes to any significant degree to accommodate the campaign against desertification. The reasons for this were: (a) few donors had staff who were familiar with the broad issues of desertification or had a structure which permitted them to acquire such expertise readily; (b) aid programmes could more easily focus on traditionally oriented sector projects; (c) the record of multi-sector assistance projects was not a good one in the eyes of most donors; (d) ranching projects in semi-arid areas were already recording a low success rate; (e) while one or two countries did attempt donor conferences on desertification, lack of co-ordination between donors and the recipient countries resulted in very little response; (f) projects presented to donors were not part of national development plans.

(c) Lack of co-ordination

Governments, donors and international organizations did not follow an integrated approach to combat desertification in large regions affected by it. Instead, they supported anti-desertification projects in an unco-ordinated way, often in an ad hoc manner. This approach had little effect on the regional causes of desertification. However, at the national level, there were a number of activities that were attempted with varying degrees of success.

(d) Failure to include desertification control activities in national development plans

(i) Most Governments in countries affected by desertification failed to include desertification control activities in their development plans. In the cases where national PACDs had been prepared, they were not integrated into the national development plan;

(ii) Many Governments failed to give due attention to the ever-increasing population pressure in areas subject to desertification and to provide alternative livelihood systems. The consequence is that fragile natural ecosystems are progressively being overtaxed without consideration for their inherent fragility.

(e) Lack of government machineries to implement PACD

(i) National institutions or machinery to combat desertification in many affected countries is inadequate or non-existent. In cases where a national institution existed, because of general economic and financial constraints, it was not provided with the necessary resources nor with the required political support;

(ii) Most Governments in countries suffering from desertification have not put in place adequate national legislation to stop the human-induced causes of desertification;

(iii) Most Governments in countries suffering from desertification encountered difficulties in creating socio-economic structures to promote successful use of available technologies to prevent and reclaim land lost to desertification;

(iv) Most Governments in countries suffering from desertification lack the technical staff and extension services necessary to deal with the phenomenon;

(v) On the whole the Governments of countries suffering from desertification failed to create viable rural financial institutions and sources of credit conducive to reducing desertification.

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(f) Lack of community participation

In some cases where Governments implemented measures to combat desertification, the impact was insufficient because (i) they lacked community participation and support, i.e., large projects were implemented from the top down, or (ii) the projects emphasized soil and water management in complete isolation from wider programmes for development and social progress.

(g) Incidence of drought

A large part of Africa south of the Sahara, especially that area most affected by desertification, faced an almost continuous rainfall deficit for most of the period 1970-1985. In the early 1980s, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Botswana, among other areas, were in the throes of a major drought which, in some countries, led to massive food shortages and loss of herds and human life. Under these circumstances, Governments, donors and the international community, which already had a marked preference for short-term investments, placed emphasis on dealing with the immediate crisis, using available financial resources for inadequate forms of assistance such as relief food aid. However, the severity of the crisis did result in some greater awareness of the underlying problems of desertification in both the recipient countries and in the donor community.

(h) Complexity of the PACD's design

20. Although it is difficult to determine whether PACD would have been implemented more effectively had it been designed or written differently, it is the considered opinion of several experts that:

(i) The use of the term "desertification" rather than "land degradation" may have caused a misunderstanding of the process, especially when the term "desertification" was translated into local languages;

(ii) The recommendations were too detailed for decision makers to consider. This may have discouraged their full consideration;

(iii) The recommendations contained in PACD were over-ambitious. As indicated in paragraph 6 (iii) above. They were so comprehensive that they seemed a blueprint for environmentally sound development. This lack of focus may have resulted in a less than desired concentration in response to the major issues;

(iv) As section VII of this report will demonstrate, some of the recommendations did not emphasize sufficiently some important aspects of PACD implementation.

VII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

21. The main causes of the lack of implementation of PACD were that both Governments and donor community, for the reasons listed in section VI of this report, did not give priority to PACD. Additionally, PACD was too ambitious for the resources available; even today it is unlikely that sufficient resources would be immediately available for its full implementation. Another

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problem is that data on desertification is not precise and that changes in t level of desertification are hard to quantify. Hence the monitoring of key indicators of desertification should be included in national and internatio environmental monitoring programmes.

22. Overall, the findings of this report do not differ significantly from those contained in the General Assessment of Progress in the Implementation the PACD 1978-1984 - UNEP/GC.12/9. However, there is a point of departure a to the validity of PACD. The 1984 Assessment reconfirmed:

(i) The validity of PACD as the tool to assist Governments in controlling the desertification process;

(ii) The premises and principles which guided the formulation of t Plan.

23. Section II of the present report reconfirms the validity of PACD as a tool for experts and technicians. The present report also reconfirms the principles contained in the Plan. However, it criticizes the Plan for its lack of focus and for omitting socio-economic factors associated with desertification that should be better understood by politicians and decisio makers.

24. It is the considered opinion of the experts who undertook the evaluatio that despite its comprehensiveness and some lack of focus, as well as the fa that some of the recommendations of the Plan omitted socio-economic aspects, PACD is a tool useful to experts and technicians involved in designing plans for combating desertification. Hence, PACD should remain a global strategy for desertification control.

25. However, there is a need for wider understanding of PACD, particularly among politicians and decision makers. To this end, there is a need to address the shortcomings outlined in section VI and for guidelines for the Plan's implementation, particularly on means of incorporating desertificatio control activities into national development plans.

26. There is also an urgent need for the preparation and dissemination of t slightly revised version of PACD and its guidelines.

27. In preparing guidelines for PACD implementation at the national and regional level, the number of suggested actions should be focused on the problem addressed and should take into account the practicalities of implementation.

28. The guidelines should emphasize socio-economic issues involving land us systems, including management of common land. The guidelines should suggest remedies for social inequities, such as land distribution, and the proper ro of women. Possible incentives for farmers should be emphasized.

29. The guidelines could possibly be written according to the following lan use systems: (i) rangelands, (ii) rainfed agriculture, (iii) irrigation, (iv) other land uses. This land use division might be followed in preparin national and regional plans of action to combat desertification.

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30. In preparing guidelines for PACD implementation, it would be clearer to group the recommendations by category, e.g.:

Category I: Monitoring and assessment and planning - Recommendations 1,2,4,5,11,12,15,16,21,22;

Category II: Management of the problem - Recommendations 6,7,8,9,10,13,14,17,18,19,20,24;

Category III: Supporting measures - Recommendations 3,23,25,26,27,28.

31. In preparing the guidelines, the importance of instituting a central planning and co-ordinating mechanism in the Government should be emphasized. Implementation of a national PACD should be decentralized. At this level, positive public participation must be ensured. The paramount importance of integrating national plans of action to combat desertification into national development plans, together with clearly allotted financial resources, must be emphasized.

32. The distinction and interrelationships between drought and desertification must be clearly and simply explained.

33. The following issues should be emphasized: (i) training in the modern methodologies of monitoring physical and social indicators of desertification; (ii) research for increasing the accuracy and practicability of these methodologies; (iii) supporting developing countries in developing their systems for monitoring desertification.

34. Training should emphasize the following topics: planning for development in drylands with recurring drought; management of soil and water in drylands; monitoring and assessment of desertification; monitoring of human conditions in drylands; evaluation of the socio-economic costs of desertification; land-use planning in drylands; provision of public information on desertification control. Training and retraining should take advantage of training institutions in both developing and developed countries. Training should also lead into the preparation of guidelines in each of the specific areas of training. In addition, there is need for public awareness campaigns among the rural pastoral people to make them strive for improved higher standards of living.

35. The guidelines should include means of encouraging NGOs to play their role in combating desertification, particularly at the grass-roots level.

36. The guidelines should explain that donor support would be more readily available if anti-desertification programmes were presented to donors as part of the national plan for sustainable development.

37. There are no suggested changes concerning the mechanisms for PACD implementation. However, the General Assembly, in its resolution 44/172, decided that the DESCON mechanism should continue to operate. Hence, there is a need for an in-depth study and consultations on how to make it more effective. Similarly, the group of experts who reviewed the validity of PACD felt that IAWGD was a very important mechanism for co-ordination and that ways and means to make it more effective should be explored. The experience gained through UNSO (see paragraphs 13 (ii) and 16) should be used as a basis for strengthening this mechanism and for exploring the possibility of setting up UNSO-like structures for other affected regions of the world.

38. Some possible additional financial mechanisms could be:

(i) An independent international corporation to raise finances and attract other investments. It would lend the funds for desertification control projects at low interest rates;

(ii) A desertification foundation to support education and research activities in some regional or national centres involved in desertification problems. UNEP should take the lead in creating such a foundation in co-operation with UNDP, other United Nations bodies, and donor countries.

39. Experience has shown that the problems of desertification control are complex, difficult and cannot be solved overnight, especially in the 1990s with a larger desertified land surface than in 1977 and a greater affected population. Achievements have been modest, but have provided valuable experience. Now, 14 years after UNCOD, the Governments, the donor community and the United Nations system have more experience in tackling some of the issues than they did in 1977.

40. Governments today have a better perception of desertification and realize the size of the problem. What is needed are demonstrable models at the country level, together with convincing data. Demonstrable models should be based on linked short-term projects to achieve long-term targets. These short-term projects should help the local populations to improve their livelihood. Efforts should concentrate on a few countries that have demonstrated political will to combat desertification with a view to making success stories that can be replicated. Emphasis should be placed on preparing national PACDs and obtaining bilateral assistance for their implementation, again step by step.

41. Apart from political will, the keys to the successful implementation of PACD are co-ordination between Governments, donors and the international community, more efficient use of existing resources and new resources. Given the current concern for environment, the time is ripe for such an initiative. However, it must be realized that financial resources of the magnitude needed to (i) stop further loss of productivity caused by desertification and (ii) rehabilitate desertified land are very difficult to raise in full. Efforts should be focused on specific components of the desertification problem. National institutions and national planning mechanisms should first be put in place, then the more tangible and tractable issues of desertification should be tackled step by step.